DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 237 016 HE 016 794

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TITLE Testimony tc the National Commission on Excellence in Education. (Public Hearing, Chicago, Illinois, June 23, 1982).
PUB DATE [23 Jun 82]
NOTE 9p.; For related documents, see ED 227 094, HE 016 788-808, HE 016 814, and HE 016 887.
PUB TYPE Legal/Legislative/Regulatory Materials (090) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Articulation (Education); *Black Students; *College Environment; *College Freshmen; Emotional Response; Hearings; Learning Experience; Peer Acceptance; Postsecondary Education; *Social Adjustment; *Student Adjustment; Student Responsibility; Student Teacher Relationship; Values
IDENTIFIERS *Excellence; National Commission on Excellence in Education

ABSTRACT

The complex problems affecting the transition from secondary to postsecondary education are reviewed by an educator who works with black students from a small, Catholic high school. The following adjustments that students face in college are discussed: a change in the way a student is taught and learns, new levels of responsibility and accountability, new types of educational support systems, different values and a different social system. In the early semesters of college, the student may find it difficult to adjust to a variety of teaching and learning styles in college and to a different type of contact with teachers. Some students lack the maturity to meet daily responsibilities encountered in college, particularly in the absence of familiar support systems. Frequent problems are encountered in dealing with different values within the college community and adjusting socially. A black student at a predominantly white college may experience additional social adjustments. It is advocated that admissions offices recognize and respond to the student's emotional adjustment to college, and that high schools help prepare seniors for these adjustments. Ways that secondary and postsecondary schools may help promote the transition of students, and the special needs of minorities, are briefly addressed. (SW)

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Testimony for National Commission on
Excellence in Education

submitted by

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There are a complexity of problems that affect the transition from secondary to postsecondary education. On the surface, many erroneous impressions can be formed. There is also a tendency to over simplify these problems. It is much simpler to examine them with a small group of students. I have been in contact with Black students in high school for the past seventeen years. Their problems of transition are as complex, an sometimes more so, than most students today. The school is a small, Catholic institution. There is ample opportunity to form close and lasting relationships with the students. There is also a chance to follow students after they have graduated. We are able to hear first hand the results of a students' progress in his first semesters in college.

I feel that there are at least three or four areas of concern with regard to this educational transition. The change in the style of education, that is, the way a student is taught and learns, is one of the areas a student must adjust to in college. Other areas are new levels of responsibility and accountability; relying on a different set of support systems for education; adjusting to a different set of values; and adjusting to a completely different social system. Colleges and high schools do not seem to recognize and deal with the effects of the above mentioned problems. Students from urban areas have some difficulty adjusting to the small college town setting. This can also complicate the manner in which the student adjust to college life.

Most colleges address the obvious problems associated with college life. (i.e. curriculum requirements, freshmen orientation, etc.) But many of them do not see the human side of the student. They seem to have forgotten what it was like for a student to make the adjustment through the different levels of education. Admissions offices should be sensitive to the emotional and psychological changes that a student is going through and try to develop programs to deal with these problems. Likewise, high schools

should develop programs for seniors to prepare them for these adjustments. Try to remember what it was like to go from pre-school to kindergarten; kindergarten to first grade; the movement from grade to grade; the graduation from elementary to secondary school. Each one of these stages was a trauma to the human system of a student. Is it not possible that the same type of reaction takes place when a student goes to college? The only difference may be that the student does not act out his anxieties, but now iner nalizes them.

I have had many opportunities to talk with many of our students who have come home to visit after one or two semesters of college. Many of them have expressed some of the difficulties mentioned above as factors affecting their problems with college. Our students attend both large and small colleges, in state and out of state, two year and four year institutions. It seems that there is no difference whether it is St. Olaf in Minnesota or Princeton, Lincoln or the University of Illinois; the adjustment problems are the same. They have found the transition difficutlt and it seems that the transition was more the problem than the academic program.

I would like to submit what I think some of the causes of these difficulties are. First of all, the student must adjust to a completely new way to learn. He must often times re-learn many of the subjects he has just completed in high school. Teaching methods vary so much that the student may take one or two semesters to adjust. Many times the adjustment is made too late. Often there is a repetition of the same material and the student does not understand that the professor may be looking for greater depth and more details. For this reason the student may become bored or fail to find the material relevant and even become over confident about his need to study the material a second time. Thus the student receives a lower grade than expected, and has a

negative experience early in his college career. Many times the student is unable to adjust to the absence of personal contact with his teacher. In high school he was able to see a teacher almost any time he wanted. In college he has to make an appointment. When he arrives at the professor's office he may find that there is standing room only. Another discouragement. He may also find the size of the classes intimidating, particularly in the required curriculum. It is a little frightening to ask a question in an auditorium with over one hundred students present. In high school his courses were taught in a manner which involved the student in every way. In college he must get used to taking a rather passive role as he learns. He also discovers that much of what he learns he must teach himself. These are just some examples of some of the difficulties encountered in the early semesters of college. Thay may have a direct bearing on the students' success in his course work and directly affect his desire to continue. There are many other instances where a student has difficulty dealing with the variety of teaching and learning styles in college. I feel that all of these factors may affect the student's desire to complete his college education.

Another problem associated with adjustment to college is becoming more responsible and accountable for yourself. It was usually assumed that if a student had completed high school, he was ready to assume his new responsibilities. Many times a student has not yet matured enough to deal with the day to day responsibilities he finds in college. Just getting to class on time may be overwhelming. Things that we all take for granted, e.g. having proper school supplies, meeting deadlines, washing your own clothes, etc., may be the very thing that a student cannot handle.(There are many adults who don't handle this very well.) It is important to remember that all of these things are being encountered for the first time!

Another factor is having to depend on something or some one completly new for support. Again, coming from a small, urban, private school makes this difficult to adjust to. In high school he had parents, teachers, school, church, and even the community for support. This included both the basic necessities as well as moral support. In college he may find his teachers distant and not be able to seek them out in time of crisis. The school is larger than anything he has experienced. Therefore he is unable to find much support from his institution. In his first semesters of college, he has usually not yet moved into a major curricular sequence; so he encounters both students and staff less frequently and is unable to make any effective relationships. And even his religious background is affected. There may be a chaplain of his faith on campus, and even a church of his denomination, but he still may find it uncomfortable to contemplate, let alone pray! As for community support, it is practically non-existent. In high school many of his support systems became literally surrogate parents or family. There is nothing available to replace this type of support.

Lastly, one of the most often mentioned problems for our students in adjusting to college is the ability to deal with a completely different set of values and his social adjustment to college life. In high school a student's values and social options were usually a constant. In college, these become the one thing that is always a variable. When a student entered high school, the parent usually played an important role in the selection of the school. They often were influenced to send their child to a particular school because it reflected the values that they thought were important. A college is usually selected based on the students' academic ability, choice of career or major and the like.

The social adjustment for the urban student can become a major problem. Many students are accustomed to having several options in filling up their free time. The recreational facilities available in a major metropolitan area are numerous. If a student is living on a campus, all of these options disappear. The student union only provides him with a few choices. In the case of a minority student, even going to a dance may be a difficult experience. A black male on a predominately white campus in a small rural community finds his choice for female companionship limited. The opposite also is true. A black student may find it intimidating in this set of circumstances. The social apprehension is staggering. Most students are still developing some kind of identity. With so few positive models for minority students, it is difficult to grow and mature. For the first time in his life, he truly understands the meaning of the word "minority"! Social acceptance is important in the black community. Being a part of something permeates black social life. It is just a simple fact of life that Blacks recreate differently than their white counterparts.

The above is an attempt to summarize some of the concerns that I have heard students talk about over the past fifteen years. If this is what they are saying and feeling, then I think educators should listen.

There are no simple solutions to some of the problems cited here. I would like to submit a few suggestions to the Commission that may be helpful in formulating some course of action.

I feel that the high school should make an attempt to provide more real life preparation for what a student will encounter. In addition to the usual accelerated academic programs, there should be a program to expose the student to actual college experiences.With declining enrollement in high schools and empty buildings and wings, perhaps a dormitory setting

could be provided on the campus of the high school. Different bell schedules for seniors with class schedules similar to the type they will encounter in college could be provided. Refresher courses in study skills as they relate to college studies could be offered. The senior year has been traditionally one of the most difficult years as far as developing a curriculum that is both interesting and relevant to the student. There should also be some kind of testing other than academic available to high school seniors. There is a need to assess the student's psychological and emotional readiness before he graduates. We should try to help the student know himself better. He, above all, should be keenly aware of his strengths and weaknesses in all areas. The senior year should serve a a type of pre-college apprenticeship. Curricula should be designed so that the college bound student is truly ready to cope with the diversity of college life.

Colleges too have a responsibility to meet all the needs of the student of the 1980's. One mid-western college has a program called "Academic Development Seminar". It is open to juniors and seniors in high school. Some freshmen are required to take the course in addition to the regular freshmen orientation. The course of study receives three credits. It is designed to improve study skills, study habits, writing skills, and reading vocabulary and comprehension, and orient the student to the use of the college library and other resource centers such as learning and math labs. This is donein small group and tutorial sessions. The student also works in groups and encouters such topics as dorm life and responsiblities and campus life in general. This is an attempt to meet the needs of the incoming college student on all levels. There is a definite need to assist minority students, particularly with regard to the social adjustments. Dissatisfaction with campus social life may be reason enough to leave school.

Freshmen orientation can no longer be just a day to figure out schedules, get dorm assigments, buy textbooks, and receive a guided tour of the campus. Nor can it be a day of inspirational speeches from everyone from the President on down. Today's college bound student needs something similar to basic training in order to cope with college. Both the high school and the college must be prepared to deal with the student in transition. They must work closely together in developing programs that bring the student directly in contact with college life. It no longer is enough for a college rep to visit a high school and talk to prospective students. Besides, all college bulletins look alike! Every effort should be made to bring the student to college and vice-versa.

The student of the 20th and 21st centuries has developed a learning style which has a direct relationship to actual experiences. He no longer takes every thing on faith. He is not satisfied with the statement "That's the way it is." He has to see, touch, feel, and experience as he learns. Our Hi-Tech society has developed generations of students who learn in the traditional way but are in need of true supportive evidence of the "way it is". It is up to the educational community to respond to these specific needs. Our system of secondary and post-secondary education is virtually unchanged for the past one hundred years. Yet man has changed or perhaps more correctly, man's perception of the world he lives in has changed. Universities and colleges must respond to these changes in order to provide a more meaningful and relevant enviorment for learning. Students won't leave a situation that they enjoy and find intellectually stimulating. Education cannot just emphasize the world as it was; but must attempt to educate in the world that is and will be.